

# An Altar on Little Thunder

BY ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE

THE toy-like, narrow-gauge railroad—Blue Ride & Western by name—meanders lazily across blue-grass pasture-lands for some eighty miles, and then makes a sudden dash up Appalachia's instep to Pardeeville, after which further progress is barred by a lofty, semi-circular escarpment of mountain-side.

Up this grade, late one summer afternoon, a quaint little wood-burning locomotive with a mushroom stack dragged its train of two diminutive coaches, taking a fresh grip every few rods, as it were, like a terrier tugging at a door-mat, until at last, all hot and panting, it drew alongside the shabby station.

A solitary passenger appeared and swung himself down and out from the steps, with a quick, peculiar motion, as if the train were a tricky horse whose heels and teeth were dangerous. He lifted his light-blue eyes at once to a hoary, lightning-riven pine far, far above, gazed fixedly for a moment, and swallowed convulsively. Then, as if remembering himself, he shot a suspicious glance about.

No one else was in sight except a lean man whose battered cap still retained a tinge of official blue, and this man nodded civilly. The young traveler's coarse, square-toed shoes, cheap gray suit, and broad-brimmed hat—all harshly new—were familiar to the station agent. Once or twice a year a mountaineer, in an outfit tallying exactly with this one, would step off the train and look about him in a dazed, half-frightened manner. And though the train always drew in at supper-time, when a cheery light shone from the chintzed windows of the Henry Clay House, just across the street, and the aroma of sugarcured ham or fried chicken floated invitingly over to the station, the agent had never known one of these men to tarry for a meal, much less a bed.

The call of the highlands was too strong. So, after getting their bearings,

like a cat dropped by a strange roadside, they always struck up the narrow, winding trail, at a gait whose easy swing disguised its swiftness. And being a tactful man, the agent never showed any undue interest—for these brogans and shoddy clothes were the commonwealth's parting gift to its discharged convicts.

Ash Whipple proved no exception to the rule; he made straight for the steep inlet, and his pace was such that dawn found him thirty miles from Pardeeville. He was tired. His new shoes had chafed his feet. His breakfast, after no supper, consisted only of a handful of blackberries and a draught of icy water. But the drink was sweeter to him than mulled wine, and he was happy, for his home was only ten miles ahead.

He was very shy, however, of his clothes, and was ready to plunge into the thicket at sight or sound of a fellow-being. But at this early hour he met no one, and he presently fell to watching, with the keenness of a boy, for certain memorable objects along the road—the skeleton oak from which he had once dropped an eagle at two hundred yards, the pool by which he had trapped nine otters in one season, Rizpah church, where he had first become conscious of his love for Nance, and the little God's acre in which his parents slept their last long sleep.

But it was the "Bald" of Little Thunder upon which his glistening eyes rested oftenest. Never in all his life, until he had ridden away with the sheriff's irons upon his wrists, had there been a day when he had not lifted his eyes to this commanding landmark, rooted in the unshakable bosom of earth, yet as changeable as the smile of a coquette, now quivering from heat, now murky with cloud-stuff, dazzling white under its winter mantle, or wreathed with vapor like a smoking crater.

He had passed the graveyard, when, as if struck by a thought, he turned back,

climbed the rail fence, and wandered among the graves, stooping here and there to scrutinize a lowly headstone. Finally, as if finding what he wanted, he paused beside a mound marked only with a board and evidently comparatively new, for the brambles and bittersweet had not yet smothered it in their thorny embrace.

"Tim, you're thar and I'm hyer," he soliloquized aloud, respectfully doffing his hat. "A second's difference on the trigger, and I'd be lookin' up and you lookin' down. Don't know as you got much the wust of it, arfter all. Be pretty sure you didn't, if it wa'n't fer Nance and the boy. As it is, more'n once I've wished I war in your place. Be there in a few years at the most, anyhow. *You* know it warn't my fault, Tim. You know who picked the quoll. You war always fair and aboveboard, and if your sperit could have gone on the witness-stand, the jury'd never sent me to the pen'tenchy, fer they give a recommendation of mercy as it war. You'd 'a' told 'em Rufe Couch lied. I wish you could speak now and tell the mountain how it war, fer I'm afraid some of 'em air goin' to hold your takin'-off agin me."

He replaced his hat and slowly retired. Once outside the inclosure, however, he all but ran in his eagerness, with his pulse pounding in his ear. But when he reached the last turn in the road which hid his cabin from view he abruptly halted, trembling, with a sudden weakness in his legs. For the first time it occurred to him that he might not find things as he had left them—that fire or pestilence, disease or death, in their stalking to and fro over the face of the earth, might have crossed his own threshold and laid their spectral hands upon his loved ones. During his two years' absence he had received no tidings from them, nor had expected any, for neither he nor Nance could write.

Fearing the worst, therefore, he did not start at the cabin's closed door, the rank weeds which hedged about the limestone doorstep, the absence of dogs and chickens. Mechanically he pulled the latch-string and entered. A smothery closeness pinched his nostrils like invisible fingers. The bed in the corner

had the sunken appearance of long disuse. No firewood littered the inglenook. The basswood bin contained no meal, no bacon hung from the rafters, no remnant of food was anywhere.

Ash returned to the roadside and sat down on a stump, with dazed eyes. Presently a barefooted boy carrying a fish-pole trudged by, whistling—a boy whom Ash had never seen.

"Bub," said he, in a husky voice, "kin you tell me where Mrs. Whipple air at?"

The boy stared as if amazed at the inquirer's ignorance. "Why, stranger, she air gone to live with her pap, over on Haws Run. Her husbunt's in the pen'tenchy fer killin' Tim Wildwith. Good thing, too, pap says, and hopes he'll die thar. What mought your name be?"

"It mought be Andy Jackson, but it ain't," answered Ash, with a wan smile. "Obleeged, though, bub."

When the boy had passed out of sight Ash re-entered the cabin and put on his old suit of "butternuts," boots, and gray wool hat. Lifting a loose puncheon in the floor, he stuffed the hated clothes which he had just removed through the opening. Then he took his rifle from its pegs above the mantel, dropped a handful of cartridges into his pocket, thrust a spy-glass into another pocket, and, after scanning the road, slipped round to the rear of his cabin.

Next to seeing his wife and babe, his mind during the last days of his imprisonment had dwelt on the pleasure of dropping into Cube Acres's smithy at the hamlet of Paint Rock and shaking hands with the "boys." Cube's place was a social clearing-house for the men of upper Little Thunder. Nestling beneath a huge chinkapin oak, its cool, dark interior and compacted cinder floor were peculiarly inviting on a hot day. The anvil music possessed a timbre which stirred the hardy denizens of these granite girders of the earth; and the showers of sparks, the cherry-red iron, the thud of sledge were so true, so genuine, so elemental that the smithy was even more popular than the doggery across the road, where a barrel of whiskey was always on tap.

But the barefooted boy's unconscious thrust had touched the quick with Ash,

and though he still felt sure of the loyalty of the habitues of the smithy, several of whom had laid out bread and coffee for him when he was hiding from the sheriff's posse, his enthusiasm over meeting them was chilled. Again, while Nance's return to her parental home, after the deprivation of her husband, was a perfectly natural thing, the news of it had somehow jarred Ash. It had obliterated by one rude stroke that picture of his home-coming which his fancy had lovingly retouched day after day; it was the first clash between dream and reality.

The root of his chagrin, doubtless, was the fact that Jethro Haws, Nance's father, was no friend of his. Jethro had opposed his marriage, had extended no helping hand in his subsequent struggle with poverty, and had stood aloof when Ash fell into the talons of the law. These facts were public knowledge, and an instinctive sense of propriety prompted Ash to rehabilitate his domestic relations before seeking readmission to the circle of his friends.

He set off at once for Haws Run, and, deciding to keep his return a secret for the present, he struck into the pathless forest which walled about his tiny clearing. Amid the trunks of the mighty liriodendrons, or "yellow poplars," he was as insignificant an object as an ant in a timothy meadow. Yet he laid a course as straight as a crow's flight except where he swerved to avoid the presence of man.

Just one habitation he did not avoid, and that, curiously enough, belonged to Rufus Couch, the man whose testimony had sent him to the penitentiary. Rufe's farm lay in a little emerald pocket which fairly bulged with the fat leachings from higher ground, and was the best on Little Thunder. "Best" was applicable to most of Rufe's possessions. He was, in Little Thunder's rating, a commercial genius. He kept a store, bought hides and pelts, ground sorghum, owned a grist-mill and a saw-mill, operated charcoal-ovens and turpentine-stills. That he profited from stills of a less innocent nature was an open secret, though "moonshining" is a topic which mountain etiquette wisely interdicts.

Yet, at the age of forty, when a fair share of Appalachian men are grand-

fathers, Rufe was still unmarried. Once he had gone a-wooing, it is true; but when the maid was all but won a man fifteen years his junior had dashed into the lists and borne off the fair prize. That man was Ash Whipple, and it was with a distinctly pleasing recollection of this feat that he stalked cautiously toward a point which would afford him a view of Couch's cabin.

An instant later an ejaculation fell from his lips. Instead of a cabin there was projected against his vision a two-story, weather-boarded house, with an ell in the rear and a veranda across the front, all painted a glistening white in the morning sun. It was such a house as Ash had never seen until his enforced journey to the lowlands, and its presence here in the mountain might almost have been accredited to the magic of a jinnee.

"And him a bachelor," murmured Ash, "with no woman to tidy up or set before the fire and knit a baby's sock."

And as he—who had a wife to sit before the fire—thought of his own humble abode, a sense of the unequal distribution of the gifts of the gods set his lips in a line as straight and hard as a joint of masonry. For this pet of Fortune was a hard man, as Ash saw him, a usurer, an exacter of the last penny; and it was his smug, unctuous testimony, whether true or false, which had tilted the scales against Ash. For this act the young convict had registered a vow—and registered it again and again, night after night, in lieu of a prayer—that his first act of freedom should be the converting of Rufe Couch's plump body into buzzards' meat.

But this tigerish thirst for vengeance had passed. One Sunday afternoon, after a long talk with the prison chaplain, it had dawned upon him that there might be better things in this world than revenge, that love was better than hate, and peace than war. And one night, not long after, he promised himself and God—it was his first prayer—that he would not injure the man who had so grievously injured him. Recalling this promise now, he turned his back upon the new house as upon a temptation, and went his way.

He desired to speak first to Nance, if

possible, without the knowledge of her family; so he approached the Hawses' big double cabin in true mountaineer fashion, dropping down from above, along the precipitous side of a peak known as Ellen's Needle. He soon discovered that something unusual was going on below. The fence was fringed with saddle-horses and the roadside packed with vehicles. For a moment his throat tightened—it might be a funeral! If so—

But sliding down two or three hundred feet farther, with perilous haste, to where he could hear voices, he perceived that the gathering was of a festal character. He then remembered that this was Nance's birthday—her twenty-second. He came empty-handed, he reflected with a pang; yet, after all, what better gift could he bring her than himself? For a moment he was tempted boldly to invade the company and claim his rightful place in the celebration. But pride and shyness restrained him, and again counseled him to reveal himself first to his wife alone.

So all day long, without bite or sup, he lay in a bit of thicket, like a hare in its form, harking for the attenuated sounds of merriment which floated up from below. Now he watched the guests playing their games, mere pawns on a chess-board they appeared, from this height; now he lay on his back with his face turned up to the fleecy cloud-drift, his mind also drifting, from present to past, from past to future, from his wild, free boyhood to his courtship and marriage, from his trailing a plow through his lean acres, awaiting Nance's call to dinner, to his breaking rock within the prison stockade.

Toward sunset, when the guests began to straggle away, he moved still farther down the declivity and took up a position on the brim of a little cuplike glen from which there issued a spring that served the Hawses for both well and refrigerator. It was an idyllic spot, cool, sequestered, and dusky with leaf-filtered light. Here if anywhere Ash would find Nance alone. She had always loved the place; loved, kneeling on the edge of the pool, to gaze at her reflected image, to scoop up the water in her palms and dash

it upon her face, to sit and listen to the wild cascade of music from the throat of the water-thrush which every year nested in a crevice of the rocks.

For Nance was not like other mountain girls. Though full of fun and as daring as a boy, she liked to steal off with only the pines and the sighing zephyrs for company, to search out the haunts of the ghostly Indian-pipe and quaint lady's-slipper. Hence it was regarded as a seven-days' wonder on the mountain when she married wild Ash Whipple.

At last, with a quickened pulse, he saw her leave the house with a bucket in one hand and a child, who could be no other than his own little Judah, marvelously grown, clinging to the other. But she had proceeded only a little way when she was overtaken by a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, heavier than the run of mountaineers, but brisk of foot, chesty, with no stoop, and adorned with hair and beard conspicuously black and glossy. This man was Rufus Couch.

He relieved Nance of her bucket and filled it at the spring, after which the pair seated themselves on a slab of stone scarcely forty feet from the clump of witch-hazel in which Whipple lay.

"Well, Nance," began Couch, in his soft voice, "'tween you and me, ain't you about ready to name the day?"

She did not return his smile or allow him to catch her eye, but lifted the child into her lap and folded her arms about him. Her face was grave, and her dark eyes, usually so animated, were lack-luster and weary.

"Rufe, I ain't no more ready, so fer as that goes, than I was the day you asked me to marry you. Don't seem as if I'd ever be ready, in any proper way. I've only waited two years fer him. He'd wait longer than that fer me."

"Mebbe yes and mebbe no," answered Couch, with an owlish tilt of his head and popping into his mouth one of the peppermint-drops which he habitually used in lieu of whiskey or tobacco. "If I remember right, he give you twenty-four hours to choose 'tween me and him, and everybody knowed Sis Elkins war the other gell he had in mind."

"That was 'fore he married me," answered Nance, listlessly. "He wouldn't

be so brash to call time on me now. A wife is more'n a sweetheart. Livin' with a woman fer two years air different from just co'tin' her."

"Mebbe yes and mebbe no. 'Sides, 'tain't a question of how long you've waited. Question is, how much longer have you got to wait? As I've told you more'n once, Squire Galum says that under the new law you never know when a feller is a-goin' to git out of the pen'tenchy. The jedge don't sentence fer no specified time. He gives what they call an in'terminate sentence, which means, I reckon, among other things, a good while. Anyhow, a feller's gittin' out depends on his behavior and the Board of Pardings. Now Ash *might* stay fourteen years, Squire says. That's the limit fer manslaughter. I ain't sayin' he will, ner I ain't hopin' he will. But you and me know that Ash ain't overly patient when he's crossed, and a man in the pen'tenchy, they tell me, air crossed at every turn. Part of the punishment, I s'pose. They don't allow he shell be happy, or too many of 'em would git to boardin' on the State, free gratis fer nothin'."

"Would you?" asked Nance, quietly.

"No," he admitted.

She blinked rapidly without quite restraining her tears, and Couch, perceiving his tactical error, burrowed into his whiskers with thumb and forefinger, and pressed them back along the sides of his jaw, outlining a chin as sharp as a fox's muzzle instead of the square one which would have matched the rest of his physique.

"Nance, if you won't name the day, won't you at least go ahead and git your divorce? All you got to do is to ask fer it. Cote will hand it right out, like I would a steel trap to a customer. Got to. Law says so—and no questions asked arfter you tell 'em your husband is a feling. It would make my comin' hyer look more proper-like to neighbors. It would please your paw and your Aunt Dill and Uncle Tice, and all your relays-tives 'cept a few that don't count. It would please *me*, Nance," he added, plaintively.

"I'd like to please you, Rufe," she answered, as if touched by his tone. "You've been so good to me."

"All I want is a chanct to be still better. My new house is done and waitin' fer you, all 'cept the furniture, which I want you to have a hand in choosin'. I don't want to hurry you. I don't agree with what your paw said to-day about people lookin' down on you as a pore-sperited thing, afraid to get a divorce from a feling and a murd'rer.

"And I don't expect you to love me at first, like you did Ash. 'Tain't in female nater, I s'pose. All I ask you to do is to let me give you a good home—the best on this hyer mounting—and leave things so you'll always have it, whether I drap off suddint or not.

"You don't want to keep on livin' with your paw and mommy, fer six, eight, ten, or twelve year yet, especially when they're so sot on your marryin' me. 'Tain't like a home of your own. Ag'in, 'twon't be so long before that little chap thar in your lap will shoot up like a willer sprout. I've often heerd you say you'd like to send him down to Sharpsburg to school, whar Chad Oaks went. You can't do it, Nance, 'thout money. Even if Ash should come back to-morrer you couldn't do it. Thar's nobody likes Ash better'n me, and it went agin my grain to testify agin him, especially as I was afeerd you'd hate me fer it. But he never was a good pervider and never will be. Sooner shoot in a turkey-match than plow corn any day."

"Poverty never had no terrors fer me," spoke up the girl, quickly. "As fer as that went, we were just as happy as if he'd been as rich as—as you."

"Suttinly," agreed Couch at once. "Thar's wuss things 'n poverty. I was only sayin' that you can't do some things 'thout money that you kin do with it. Eddicatin' a boy is one of 'em. And eddication air a great thing these days. That little tad of a Chad Oaks air makin' more money to-day than his paw, and he knows that great city of Lexin'ton like you and me know our back-yards."

Nance's eyes grew luminous, perhaps with a vision of such a future for her little Judah; then the light died away. "They all leave the mounting and their mothers when they git an eddication," said she, sadly.

"Yes; but mebbe you and me 'll want to leave, too, by the time Jude grows

up. I could make more money below than I kin hyer, even with no eddication."

He paused, as if to let this observation soak in, and then returned to the subject from which his mind was never long absent.

"Applyin' your own words of a minute ago, you'll feel different to'ds me arfter you've lived with me a year or so. I mean about shakin' Ash. S'fer as that goes, he's dead to you now. If he ever comes back, it 'll be like a man from the grave. S'fer as that goes, I don't look fer him back. Fust place, prison's a bad place fer an outdoor man like him. Consumption gits 'em—them long-term fellers—like it did Blake Orr. And even if they let him out, 'count of his sickness, like they did Blake, he'd only be a pore, no-'count, dead-alive kind of a man. He'd on'y be—"

He broke off at Nance's shudder. "Rufus Couch," she exclaimed, in a tone which made him quail, "if ever Ash Whipple comes back lookin' like Blake Orr did, I'll nuss him to his dying day, wife or no wife of yours."

"I give you that permission, right hyer and now," he answered, quickly. "Kin a man do more? And kin you do less than promise you'll git your divorce right soon now?"

She sat for some time with her pretty, square chin nestled in the palm of one brown hand, gazing at the distant, fringy sky-line of pines.

"I'll get it soon," she promised.

He seized her free hand gratefully. "Kin I kiss you now, Nance—just once?"

"No—not while I'm another man's wife."

She rose, Couch lifted the bucket of water, and they walked away together, little Jude chasing a monarch butterfly.

At Couch's first sentence the concealed man had quivered like a polled ox. Thenceforward, though no word that followed escaped his ears, he lay with his lips pressed to the earth. As this incredible, this monstrous drama went on beneath him—his wife listening to another man's words of love—he clenched and relaxed his hands, twisted his body from side to side, as if striving to free himself from a crushing weight. But his

efforts came to naught, like the impotent struggles of one in a dream. All strength had gone out of him. To shoot the traitor, to leap down and by his mere presence give the lie to Couch's assertions—these thoughts came. But they also passed, as idle, as futile as the figments of a drugged brain.

In prison Ash had never abandoned hope, or sunk in sullen despair, or hardened his heart against his kind, or become as a ravening wolf, like some of his cell-mates. But summoning a fortitude of which his commonplace exterior gave no hint, he had resolved that, hurt his body as they might, they should not destroy his soul.

It was a noble resolution, but its complete execution was not humanly possible. Somewhere between his heart and his throat, in spite of himself, there came a lump that would neither up nor down, that persisted from his waking in the morning, at the sullen boom of the cell-house gong, until the measured step of the guard at night on the cold, concrete floor of the corridor grew faint and remote in his consciousness and finally ceased. And that fetor, that noisome emanation from caged things, be they men or animals, sickened lungs which had known only the pure, balsamic air of the mountain.

When the warden and an assistant, on his reception at the prison, had searched and stripped him, they took more than his clothes, jack-knife, a few nickels and dimes, and his plug of tobacco. These they gave back when he was freed. But they had taken something they did not give back—could not give back.

Society had said to him, through her agents of court and prison, "Be patient; wear these stripes for a few years for your own good, and then we will take them off." But she had lied, for she had burned those stripes into him with hot and smoking irons—the 4 x 7 cell, the lock-step, the rock-pile, the shorn head; systematic humiliations and degradations, such as the stew-pan in which his food was flung like scraps for a dog, the prohibition to speak to his mates, the substitution of a number for his name. She had made these stripes as ineffaceable as the leopard's spots or the sable skin of the Ethiop. And she had burned them

deep as well as wide, searing his blithe spirit, drying up his youthful blood, making him old before his time.

At first he had not realized his mutilation. In the days preceding his emancipation, indeed, he had forgotten it. But on the streets of the penitentiary city, at the station, on the train, at Pardee-ville, he saw that he was a social leper. He looked forward, however, to the mountain, as a pious Mohammedan to Mecca, as a place of cleansing. He had shed the hated prison garments, as if the pollution lay in them. Alas! the words of a barefooted boy had disillusioned him, had made him fearful and distrustful of his former friends.

But whoever might be for or against him, whatever opinion men might hold of his crime—yea, whether guilty or innocent in the sight of Heaven itself—there was one upon whose fidelity he counted as upon the fidelity of his right hand to his left; whose steadfastness to him was like that of the magnetic needle for the pole; whose outstretched arms of welcome he as certainly expected to find as the mountain itself upon which he had been born. Not that he was worthy of this supreme loyalty, not that he had been a good husband always, or had always eased her burden when opportunity offered, but because it was her nature to be true, because unfaithfulness was as unthinkable in her as lukewarmness in the sun; and he would as soon have expected to see the seasons fail in their appointed procession, or the Great Bear cease to swing around the pole-star, as that Nance should swerve from her altar vows. Yet now even *she*—

He crawled slowly up the slope, like the wounded thing that he was, making for the fastnesses where no man might find him out. His fortitude had withstood every shock since the hour he entered that arched gate which might well have borne the legend, "Leave hope behind all ye who enter here." But soon he paused, exhausted. Then, with the terrible, wrenching groan of the strong man in agony, he cast himself upon the ground and wept like a child.

It was morning before his mind ceased to stagger in the cataclysmic chaos. But peace came at last, and, lo! he who had always been so quick to avenge now for-

gave. More than that, he justified. He perceived that, on the whole, Rufus Couch had summed up the facts correctly; that Nance, in accepting Rufe's hand, was only following the guidance of her maternal instincts. That she still loved him, but had laid her love upon a sacrificial altar, was plain to Ash.

This idea of sacrifice, of vicarious suffering, grew upon him. Lately certain high aspirations had settled upon himself, like doves of heaven. He had resolved, for instance, never to drink another drop of whiskey, to work with might and main that he might ameliorate his poverty, never to leave Nance any unnecessary chores to do, never again to unbridle his tongue against her, never to deny her, as he had too often in the past, any of the trinkets dear to a woman's heart. But these resolutions paled before the great service which, it was now revealed to him, lay within his bestowal. This was nothing less than the obliteration of himself from Nance's life, that she might never have cause to question the wisdom of her present course or plague herself with vain regrets.

His renunciation did not spring full-fledged into being. It was born in travail, like all earthly things. But it grew apace and waxed stronger with the days. Prudence counseled him to leave the mountain at once. But he cringed momentarily before the terrors of that unknown, hostile land called "Below," where alone he could bury his identity beyond peradventure of discovery, and he persuaded himself that it would be better to tarry until Nance's marriage was a fact.

However, in order to run no risk of being seen, he took up his habitation in the somber, boulder-strewn solitude of the Bald, where the noble arboreal growth of the side was replaced by an occasional stunted, deformed shrub, clinging to the crevice from which it sucked its scanty nourishment, scorched by the summer sun, twisted and frozen and threshed about by winter's furies; and where the swift shadow of an eagle or the gray streak of a startled lizard was the only sign of sentient life.

Yet happiness found him out even here—a still, hushed, voiceless happiness, in keeping with the soundless void around.

He daily grew thinner, his skin dried up like parchment, and a feverish light shone from his eyes; but when he lay on his back at night and looked up at the flaring stars—so near that in fancy he could hear the rush and roar of conflagration under the cosmic draughts of heaven—he felt God's invisible but beatific smile, and caught the echo of His "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!"

Nance's wedding-bells were to ring his knell—send him into an exile scarcely less dreaded than death. Yet the preliminaries of her marriage became of absorbing interest to him. He kept the homes of Jethro Haws and Rufus Couch under constant surveillance, often tramping the four miles between the two several times a day. As blindness sharpens the ears, distance sharpened his perception and deduction. He knew when Nance set out for her divorce, accompanied by her father and old Squire Galum, Little Thunder's only legal luminary. He knew when she bought the stuff for her wedding-gown. He also saw the coming of the furniture for her new home. He saw the people flock in, by families and by wagon-loads, from far away, to see the new house with its twenty windows, kerosene lamps, and other marvels.

Finally, when the maples were flinging out their scarlet banners and the nights were sharp with frost, an unwonted activity about the Haws cabin, and the arrival of three or four aunts and uncles of Nance's who lived at a distance, left Ash in no doubt that the morrow would be the wedding-day.

His excitement must at least have matched the bride's. With the morbid self-depreciation which had now become habitual, he had no doubt that this marriage was regarded by Nance as of much more importance than her former one, for the first groom was a ne'er-do-well, but the present one the richest man on Little Thunder. He yearned to figure in it, however humbly. He wanted to make her a present anonymously. But, cut off from stores and his kind, what could he send?

As his eyes fell upon a clump of asters he remembered her love, almost her passion, for these beautiful, wild harbingers of the twilight of the year; remembered

how, when they flung their nodding, delicate sprays from every fence-corner, she would fill her arms with the pretty "blue-faces," as she called them.

So at midnight, bearing a great sheaf of the finest plants he could find, he stole down to her cabin, with a tumultuous heart, and set them in a piggin of rain-water, that they might keep fresh. Then from the dark shadow of a bush he gazed hungrily at the low window in the north loft, formerly Nance's room, and presumably now occupied by her.

"Good-by, Nancy, good-by!" he whispered.

He set out for his cabin for the first time since his return, trusting himself, owing to the lateness of the hour, to the road. Before she and Couch should be made man and wife he expected to be miles away. Where? He asked himself the question as he prepared for the journey, removing his beard and trimming his shaggy hair, laying the shears and razor away, and obliterating all traces of his visit. Below—but just where?

At the sight of his bed—*her* bed—illuminated by the yellow flare of the "lightwood" on the hearth, a great weariness seized him. His limbs ached, and all the hardness of all the rocks on which he had been sleeping seemed to gather in the muscles of his back.

"I'll drap down hyer a couple of hours," he said aloud to himself, as he had fallen into the habit of doing. "Lemme see! I'll rise in time to git as fer as Bone Gap by sunup. From the Gap I'll slip down to Peewee Valley. From thar I'll take the fust road I see a gray hoss on. A gray hoss is a sign of luck ef no red-haired woman air nigh. Then I'll—I'll—"

He slept. Tired was his body, and easy his couch. The tension was over, his interest gone. Henceforth he had but to drift like an autumn leaf before November's gusts. He not only slept, therefore; he overslept. When he awoke he blinked in amazement. The door, which he had carefully closed, was open, and a lusty sun was flooding the room with light and warmth.

He rubbed his eyes, but the hallucination only deepened. Over a cheerful fire a bubbling pot hung from the crane. A child, like his own little Jude, but bigger,



played on the floor. Nance was sitting in a rude rocker which he had once made for her on a rainy day, with only a draw-knife, a saw, and an auger for tools, and without nails or glue. It was her favorite chair, and she was in her favorite attitude. With elbows upon knees and her chin in her palms, she smiled at him in quite her old way.

"You've had right smart of a nap, honey," said she.

"What time is it?" he demanded, vacantly.

"Nigh on to airy dinner-time." She laughed a little with suppressed excitement at his bewilderment, and approached his bed. The shine in her eyes was unearthly bright, and he shrank a little. "I reckon you ain't got the sleep outen your eyes yet," she continued. "What did you think when you come home last night and didn't find me hyer?"

He stared at her intently, suspiciously. "Nance, air that you a-talkin', or air it your sperit?"

"It's me, Ash."

"Lemme feel your hand."

She slipped it into his. "Don't you see it's me!" she exclaimed, playfully. But her smiling face suddenly crinkled under a very different emotion, and with a quick, sharp cry she flung herself upon him. "My pore boy, you're so thin!"

How long she remained there, without speech, clinging to his neck, he never knew. But at last she sat up and wiped her eyes.

"You broke jail, honey?" she asked, anxiously.

"No. Payrolled out fer good behavior. They give me a suit of clothes, a railroad ticket to Pardeeville, and a five-dollar greenback." He paused. What had brought her to the cabin he could not guess. He only knew that his treacherous sleep had betrayed him into her hands.

"Not that suit you got on."

"No." He paused again. There seemed no way of threading the maze except with the guiding lamp of truth. "Nance, I didn't come back last night. I come back two months ago. I heerd you war goin' to marry Rufe Couch. I heerd it from your lips and his'n, layin' by the spring, where I'd sneaked down to see you alone if I could. Looked to me like it war the best thing fer both

you and the boy, and I decided to clear out and never disturb you no more. I waited to make sure thar'd be no slip, and I war goin' away last night, but that overpowerin' sleep ketched me like a weasel in a trap. I'll go to-night. Nobody but you knows I'm hyer."

"Nobody but me!" The old drollery came into her blue-black eyes. "Go, sugar-pie, and when you're tired of wanderin', make sure I'm right hyer waitin' fer you."

"But little Jude thar—his eddication!" he faltered.

"Listen, Ash! Last night I never slept except once, and that little Jude there come to me in a dream; but he was a grown man, just back from school, and looked so fine and handsome. But instead of kissin' me he frowned and said: 'Nance Whipple—fer that's your name—I've found my daddy. He was cold and hungry and dirty, and he said to me, 'Jude, your mommy sold her soul fer a painted house and an ar'n stove.'" Ash, I knew then I could never marry Rufe Couch. I got right up and called mommy, and before sunup I was ridin' hyerwards, with Jude on one arm and a basket that mommy had packed fer me on the other. I warn't goin' to give dad a chance to turn me out. And when I seen you layin' on that bed, I knew that dream had been sent to me."

As feels a shipwrecked sailor who has long breasted wind and wave and finds sudden safety and repose on an unsuspected isle, so felt Ash Whipple as he sat with Jude in his arms and watched Nance set the table. But at last he broke the spell of contented silence.

"Nance, I mought ride over to the Run and engage the pa'son when he comes, and go on down to Holly Tree fer a marriage license, and you and me be tied up ag'in to-night. Sich of your relatives as want to come air welcome; sich as don't kin face t'other way."

"Just as you please, Ash. No hurry so fer's I'm concerned. My sleep won't be no less sound to-night, merridge or no merridge," said Nance, sturdily, as she skilfully swung out the crane. "I never did feel as if that divorce unmarried me, and I'm thinkin' in the eyes of God it didn't, no matter what the mounting might say."